

Toxics in Schools

Case Study

(Mercury Spill In Classroom)

School: St. Joseph's Regional School
92 Wilson Street
Keene, NH

Contact: Carolyn O'Connell, Principal



Summary: On October 13, 1997, a student dropped a jar containing about 1 ounce of elemental mercury on a classroom floor, shattering it and splattering mercury on the floor and students' backpacks. A janitor attempted to vacuum up the spill, spreading the mercury further. The next day, the school's principal contacted the Department of Environmental Services (DES) and closed the school to allow a professional hazardous waste remediation company to remove the mercury. Following a health advisory released by the Department of Health & Human Services, the school held a town meeting for parents. The meeting was more confrontational than informational as angry parents demanded information, and the meeting fueled several embarrassing news articles. Following a costly clean up, the school finally opened on October 24th, ten days after the spill occurred.

History: On Monday afternoon, October 13, 1997, an eighth grade student dropped a jar containing about an ounce of elemental mercury. The jar shattered and mercury was scattered on the floor, clothing and backpacks of about 17 students. A janitor tried to sweep up and then vacuum the mercury, further spreading mercury fumes throughout the classroom. Only then, were the affected students ushered into a neighboring classroom.

Principal Carolyn Principal O'Connell found out about the mercury spill late Monday night. On Tuesday, October 14, she contacted DES and hired Seacoast Ocean Services (SOS) to properly clean up the spill. Health and fire officials from Keene, Diocesan officials, and Risk Management Specialists from the Department of Health & Human Services were also involved in the process. Principal O'Connell closed the school for one day on Tuesday, but this closure was extended indefinitely as the cleanup revealed that three rooms required decontamination: the 8th grade classroom, the janitor's room, and a 6th grade classroom.

On Thursday October 16, Risk Assessment officials released an information report and the school requested that the seventeen eighth-grade students who were in the classroom when the incident occurred bring in any clothing, back packs, book bags, and other belongings that may have come in contact with the mercury so they could be tested by SOS.

As parents' concerns grew, and they demanded more information, the school decided to hold a Town Meeting on October 19th. In an emotionally charged atmosphere, angry parents demanded to know how the 6th grade classroom had become contaminated, why only 8th grade students were checked for mercury contamination and why students weren't evacuated from the spill even during the vacuuming procedure. Following the meeting, several newspapers printed stories with titles like, *"Parents Want Answers on Mercury"* and *"Parents Demand Facts."*

Following approval by State and local officials, the school reopened on Monday, October 24, 1997.

Results: The cleanup generated six 55-gallon drums of uncontaminated or low level contaminated waste, mostly carpeting, one 5-gallon container of mercury contaminated wastewater, and one 5-gallon container of mercury contaminated materials. The school was closed for 10 days. Along with several thousand dollars of cleanup costs, the school had to contend with not only bad publicity and angry parents, but also a potential for lawsuits.

Recommendations:

This problem could have been avoided if St. Joseph's originally conducted a school-wide chemical inventory. This way, the school would have known what hazardous materials they had, where they were located, and in what amounts. Hazardous materials that were no longer of use, such as mercury, could have been disposed of properly, alternative chemicals researched and necessary chemicals better stored and protected. Further, St. Joseph's School should have implemented an emergency and spill response plan and trained support staff and teachers in proper response procedures in an emergency or spill. This would have resulted in better protection of the students' health and the environment as well as protecting the school from legal exposure.